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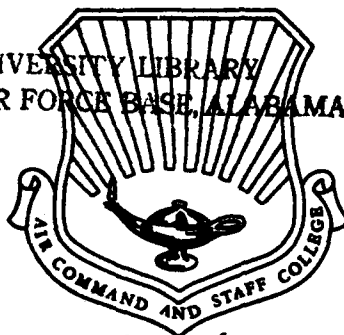
Toumbacaris, G. B., Jr.

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RESEARCH REPORT

FOLLOWSHIP: PREPARATION FOR

EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

Maj G. B. Toumbacaris, Jr.   2415-79

1979

"insights into tomorrow"

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FOLLOWERSHIP: PREPARATION FOR EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

By

George B. Toumbacaris, Jr., Major, USAF

AN ARTICLE FOR PUBLICATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY

March 1979

Charles E. Gries
Lieutenant Colonel, USAF
Research Advisor

John C. Smith
Editor

AIR UNIVERSITY
MAXWELL AIR FORCE BASE, ALABAMA

ABSTRACT

The conventional approach to improving leadership focuses on the leader himself, his attributes, traits, or situations in which he is involved. This article presents the idea that effective leadership can be the result of better, more active followership. That is, followers have the most consistent effect on leadership, and by improving follower activities and skills, they can improve the overall level of leadership. The discussion emphasizes those areas that concern followers on a daily basis. The article concludes with the idea that followers can achieve the best results by concentrating on skills of followership in their work environment.

PREFACE

This article addresses the role of followership in today's Air Force, with the goal of improving the overall quality of leadership. The author undertook this project because the primary thrust of current literature and teaching focuses exclusively on leadership and management in the context of commanders and supervisors. Followers also confront many organizational and interpersonal problems on a daily basis. The author believes that followers, as individuals, can do much to improve and correct problem situations within their organizations. As individuals practice and enhance their "followership skills," their influence can extend upward to their leaders, laterally to their peers, and downward to subordinates. To the degree that they can influence others, followers can improve the quality of life in the Air Force.

This research project was prepared as an article for publication in satisfaction of my Air Command and Staff College research requirement. It may not be copyrighted.

PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND

MAJOR GEORGE B. TOUMBACARIS, JR.

Military Experience Related to Research Topic:

1975-1978	Chief, Management Systems Branch, Aeronautical Systems Division Computer Center, Aeronautical Systems Division (AFSC), Wright-Patterson AFB OH
1971-1975	NORAD/NPCP, Assistant for Computer Programs, Ent AFB CO
1965-1970	HQ SAC/DOCODS, Systems Support Branch, Offutt AFB NE

Education:

1971	MCS, Texas A&M University
1965	BA, Mathematics, Mississippi State University

Special Professional Background Associations:

- Sigma Iota Epsilon, Honorary Management Fraternity
- Upsilon Pi Epsilon, Honor Society in the Computing Sciences

The Need for More Effective Followership

As a student at Air Command and Staff College, I heard many guest speakers express the need for more effective leadership in the Air Force. General David C. Jones, as Air Force Chief of Staff, expressed a similar view when he stated his desire "to make a good service better."[1] I believe that the Air Force develops good leaders, but my experience and the comments of fellow officers suggest that the Air Force can improve the quality of its leaders. And many officers and airmen expressed much the same perceptions in the Air Force Quality of Life surveys. When asked to describe the quality of leadership in the Air Force, only 41 percent of the officers and 22 percent of the airmen included in the survey perceived it as excellent or above average.[2]

While I was considering possibilities for improving leadership, the thought occurred to me that followers determine who becomes effective or ineffective leaders. In other words, people can gain new insights into their responsibilities and exercise more positive influence on their organizations if they view their jobs from the perspective of followers. And, when they view their

responsibilities from this perspective, they are less likely to fall victim to the syndrome of "It's a leadership problem." I consider the follower perspective very important because, in many organizations, it is quite difficult to determine exactly who is the leader. Some people view a leader as anyone in a supervisory position; others view only the highest ranking officers as leaders; and still others include all people between these extremes.

My Concept of Followership

In my opinion, a follower is anyone who is supervised by, or is responsible to, someone at a higher level. This definition obviously suggests that all Air Force personnel are followers. Even though they may occupy supervisory or command positions, they are followers in the sense that they report to higher authority.

I do not imply that my concept for developing followership is an original idea; but I hypothesized that I could examine a variety of sources and establish some fundamental principles of effective followership. After a considerable period, I concluded what I believed was a reasonably exhaustive search and discovered that I

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had limited information on followership. Nevertheless, I decided that I would test my concept to determine whether it might be beneficial to the Air Force or, at least, to my own professional career.

In my initial effort to develop principles of followership and use the principles as points of departure for further discussion, I found that most principles are highly subjective. I sought to avoid the kind of trap encountered by many early writers on leadership when they identified traits or characteristics of successful leaders and then attempted to establish leadership models based on the traits. Most people agree that effective leaders do not possess precisely the same traits or characteristics and that they do not apply identical leadership or managerial styles. I therefore concluded that effective followers also show wide variations in traits and styles.

I based my study of followership on the assumption that the average individual has little effect on leadership as s whole, but he can improve his skills of followship. For example, concerned followers certainly exercised a positive influence in changing the Officer Effectiveness Report. On the other hand, if a follower does not strive for improvement, the result can be less

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effective leadership. In what areas can an individual improve his skills in followership? To answer this question, I examined the USAF Management Consultation Information System (MCIS) maintained by the Leadership and Mangement Development Center at Air University. The MCIS has a data base of information derived from reports of visits by LMDC management consultant teams concerned with increasing mission effectiveness by enhancing job satisfaction and improving the quality of Air Force life. (All data in the MCIS contains no information that can be traced to specific Air Force units.)[3]

One MCIS report identified a number of significant management problems encountered by these teams during their visits to Air Force installations. Since the teams identified the problems as fundamental concerns of management, I decided to select problem areas that seem most relevant from the perspective of the follower: communications, delegation, recognition, leadership styles, and work hours/schedules.[4]

Areas for Applied Followership

Followers have continuing opportunities to play major roles in improving communications:

> Organizational communications problems are
> the most widespread concerns found in the

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> MCIS. The data include perceived defi-
> ciencies in both oral and written communi-
> cation--upward, downward and lateral. The
> consultants have frequently observed that
> poor communications contributes to the use
> of widespread rumors. People react to what
> they believe to be factual information.
> Morale is often adversely affected by poor
> communications and much energy is often
> misdirected as a result of inadequate or
> misunderstood information.[5]

Unfortunately, MCIS data reflects that Air Force per-

sonnel at all levels perceive ineffective upward,

downward, and lateral communications. Upward communica-

tion to higher management, in particular, is often

completely lacking or is so selectively filtered that

it contains little or no information of value. For

example, 52 percent of the base commanders surveyed by

the Air Force Management Improvement Group (AFMIG) in

1975 stated that the most effective means of receiving

feedback from military personnel assigned to their bases

were personal contacts with military members other than

their staffs.[6] Only 13 percent of the respondents

believed that their staffs were the most effective means.

Additionally, only 60 percent of these same commanders

felt that they received enough feedback.[7] The reports

of LMDC contain such remarks as the following:

> In many cases, supervisors and managers have
> blocked upward communication channels. As a
> result, we often hear such comments as: "I

don't want to bother the boss with this," or
"I just didn't think the information was
important."[8]

One naturally feels that downward communication
would be one of the most effective communication areas
because most Air Force communications follow a downward
course. In most instances, however, supervisors either
fail to pass on necessary information or they dissemi-
nate unclear or confusing information. The MCIS reflects
the perception that "supervisors have blocked downward
communication by declaring information they have as of
little interest to their subordinates. In such cases
subordinates have felt deprived, left out, and considered
as 'unimportant members of the organization.'"[9] Lack of
downward communication even extends to job performance.
Only one of four individuals stated that they frequently
receive feedback from their supervisors.[10] Lateral com-
munication fares better probably because people feel more
comfortable when they discuss information with their peers.

I firmly believe that followers can do much to im-
prove the Air Force communications environment by recog-
nizing that effective communications follow a clear two-
way street. Not only must the boss clearly understand
the task to be accomplished, but followers must also
have compatible perceptions of the task as the boss sees

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it. Thus, followers can apply certain simple techniques of their own to insure successful communications. If they do not understand their instructions, they should recognize their problem and ask for clarification. They can also restate the instructions and request acknowledgement. In either event, they can play important roles in maintaining clear communications up and down the chain of command. For example, the boss may use an unfamiliar term or acronym in presenting a briefing or giving instructions to a group. The group clearly does not understand the terminology, but no one asks for clarification. Is such an impasse necessary? How much time and energy is misspent because of simple lack of communication?

As a follower, I have often felt that I could do nothing about improving a manager's delegation of responsibility. But every follower can at least be prepared and willing to accept responsibility. Many Air Force members have outstanding educational backgrounds and superb technical skills or knowledge, but they appear reluctant to accept additional responsibility. This apparent reluctance may stem from their doubts about their ability to handle additional responsibility or from a supervisor's misconception of individuals. On the other hand, some individuals are willing to accept responsibility, but they are not prepared to carry it

out. LMDC experience confirms that Air Force personnel
attach major importance to proper delegation of respon-
siblity and authority:

> This issue contains much emotion and has a
> high potential for degradation of mission
> effectiveness. Subordinates frequently per-
> ceive that they "do not have the authority
> and responsibility commensurate with their
> rank, position, and expertise." Many feel
> that they are denied a "piece of the action"
> or are not permitted to participate in
> decisions directly related to their exper-
> tise and responsibilities. Too many workers
> feel they are under-utilized, that they have
> expertise, capabilities, and desire for
> increased responsibility...Delegation com-
> municates trust and is a form of recognition.
> Conversely, the lack of delegation implies
> a lack of trust....[11]

An effective follower has an obvious obligation to com-
municate his ability and his willingness to accept in-
creased responsibility. Volunteering to take on a
difficult project with a short suspense may be just the
action necessary to catch the boss's attention and open
the door to new opportunities.

Air Force personnel often feel that they do not
always receive earned recognition. In the 1975 AFMIG
survey, slightly less than one-half of the officers
surveyed felt that they frequently received recognition.
The remaining 52 percent answered that they were recog-
nized only sometimes (33 percent), seldom, or never
(19 percent).[12] These perceptions have been further

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reinforced by LMDC consultation teams in their visits
to various bases. Their reports indicate that people
perceive a lack of recognition ranging from the simple
informal "thank you" to such formal recognition programs
as "Airman of the Quarter." The awards and decorations
program is often perceived as inequitable and arbitrary.
LMDC teams add that many managers and supervisors maintain
close contact with their people only when things go wrong.
They tend to ignore their subordinates when the jobs are
performed effectively. The MCIS report contains this
statement:

> As a result of these practices, people feel
> that their contributions are not recognized
> or appreciated, that, no one cares, and a
> general feeling that they are "unimportant."
> A feeling of apathy resulting in poor motiva-
> tion therefore often detracts from effective
> mission accomplishment.[13]

The Air Force has dealt, in part, with this problem by
publishing the "Recognition Guide for Air Force Super-
visors," which effectively addresses the supervisor's
side of the issue, but what can a follower do to improve
his opportunities for recognition?

Although the follower may be somewhat handicapped
with the idea that he does not want to "blow his own
horn," I feel that he is not completely helpless. In
the first place, he can always do his part by keeping
his boss properly informed. This form of communication

not only lets the boss know what the follower is doing
but also affords the follower an opportunity to let the
boss know how things are going. Of course, the follower
should coordinate with his boss on the frequency and
depth of the communication. The follower should also
recognize that the degree of communication will vary from
task to task depending on such factors as the supervisor's
knowledge of the task, the individual's knowledge, criti-
cality of the task, higher level of interest, and so on.
My own experience shows that proper recognition is more
likely when both parties communicate effectively on a
timely basis. Forty percent of the base commanders
surveyed in 1975 stated that they did not receive enough
feedback from personnel on their bases.[14] I believe
that the same problem applies to supervisors in general.
I also believe that a boss cannot properly recognize
his followers if he does not know what they are doing,
how they are doing, and the types of problems that they
encounter. In the second place, a follower should not
hesitate to tell the boss that a co-worker is doing a
good job when an appropriate occasion arises. This
can build good teamwork, and the boss will not think
less of the individual for the information.

Problems with leadership styles and practices rank

second in the frequency of cases observed by LMDC con-

sultation teams:

> The following statements are typical of cases
> where leadership styles and practices have
> been of concern: "overly authoritarian,"
> "dictatorial," "out of touch with people,"...
> "poor planning," "failure to delegate,"
> "failure to communicate," "does not praise."
> ...Where we have found leaders practicing
> sound communication techniques, delegating
> appropriately and praising liberally, we
> have not encountered this issue.[15]

These LMDC observations and my own observations lead me

to conclude that followers can affect communications,

delegation, and recognition of their efforts. When they

assume an active role in communication and express their

willingness and ability to assume additional respon-

sibility, they have a direct effect on their boss's

leadership style.

Another way to affect his style is to contract for

a leadership style. That is, the follower and his boss

discuss various job-related factors, such as past

experience, job knowledge, an understanding of require-

ments, willingness to accept responsibility, motivation,

and personal commitment. Depending on his knowledge of

specific tasks, the follower may contract for light,

moderate, or close supervision. If the follower repeats

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a task that he has performed well in the past, light
supervision would be sufficient. If he undertakes a
new task, closer supervision might be more appropriate.
Similarly, he discusses other factors that may influence
the contract. This procedure can cover all aspects of
an individual's job. The resulting contract may con-
tain a variety of supervisory levels, each relating to
a particular task. The most important aspect of the
contract is that both the boss and the follower jointly
agree to the terms set forth in the contract and that
both understand their mutual obligations. Although all
followers may not have jobs that allow for this con-
tracting approach, any follower can discuss with his
boss the basic idea of varying the degree of super-
vision with the task.[16]

Many followers feel that they have little or no
control over their work hours and schedules, but I con-
tend that effective followers can definitely influence
this area of the work environment. Common perceptions
involve excessive overtime requirements, weekend/holiday
work, and inequities in duty schedules. Although fol-
lowers and even their bosses cannot always avoid over-
time situations, concerned followers can certainly dis-
cuss inequities in overtime assignments with their

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supervisors. Consultation teams report some cases in which people must "hang around" for entire shifts with little or nothing to do.[17] Followers can tactfully communicate such conditions to their supervisors, who may simply be unaware of the situation.

However, followers have the best opportunities to influence their work schedules when they combine effective communications and demonstrated willingness to accept responsibility. In other words, they can ask to schedule their own work; and, when a supervisor is willing to delegate this task, he can eliminate much discontent over schedules and work hours.[18] I can confirm this condition with my own experience on both sides of the issue.

Communications, delegation, recognition, leadership styles, and work hours/schedules are only a few areas that provide opportunities for effective followers. If followers can remember nothing more than the importance and necessity of good communication and do their part in improving this area of responsibility, they can be certain of positive results.

Follower-Leader Link

At the beginning of this discussion, I defined a follower as anyone supervised by, or responsible to,

someone at a higher level. Since this definition includes all Air Force personnel, I believe that the service can benefit as individuals become better followers. By viewing problems from the follower's perspective, individuals can play major roles in improving their organizations. First, by practicing followership skills, they can become more sensitive to the needs of their organization through enhanced communication and acceptance of broader responsibilities. But the greatest benefit will be the improved organizational climate and more productive relationships between followers and their leaders. Obviously, many followers hold positions of leadership. Thus, by understanding and practicing the skills of followership, they can enhance their relationships with both their supervisors and their subordinates.

This relationship applies the "linking pin" concept described by Rensis Likert in these terms: "Subordinates expect their supervisors to be able to exercise an influence upward in dealing with problems on the job and in handling problems which affect them and their well-being."[19] In other words, many followers function as "links" between followers above and below them. These so-called "links" are vital contact points in the chain

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of communication, but many supervisors fail to recognize the importance of their followership roles. That is, they tend to forget that their examples as followers have as much impact on their subordinates as their examples as leaders.

> Superiors seriously underestimate the extent
> to which their subordinates feel that their
> boss understands their problems. It is
> striking that foreman and general foreman
> feel that they understand the problems of
> their subordinates well, but each level
> feels that its boss does not understand
> the problems of his subordinates.[20]

I strongly believe that, if a supervisor is fully aware of his role as a follower, his subordinates can perform more effectively and he can provide more efficient support for his boss.

Earlier in my discussion, I suggested that less effective leadership may result from poor followership. Although I cannot definitely state that poor followership will result in poor leadership, I do conclude that the knowledge and practice of followership skills will enhance a leader's ability and that he can be more acutely aware of both perspectives in his dealings with people. An officer or NCO should not wait until he attains the rank of colonel or chief master sergeant to become a leader. He must develop his followership skills early in his career. I believe that one who does

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not practice these skills may attain high rank, but he will probably not be an effective leader. Whether we admit it or not, effective leadership depends on good followership; and good followership requires a conscientious effort.

We usually know the right way to approach a task, but frequently we behave otherwise because we are so preoccupied with performing the task that we ignore personal relationships. As we become more aware of both the task and our relationships, we should conscientiously apply our skills of followership in the total work environment. In this manner, application of followership skills can affect our leadership ability. As we progress through the ranks, we can multiply our followership skills through our contacts with other leaders and followers. Thus, our role as effective followers today will ultimately influence the quality of our leadership in the future.

FOOTNOTES

1. Air Force Management Improvement Group, "Active Duty Military Personnel," Quality of Air Force Life Survey (Washington: Department of the Air Force, 1975), p. ii. Hereafter cited as "Active Duty."

2. Ibid., "United States Air Force Base Commanders Survey," Sample, sec. IV, p. 1. Hereafter cited as "Base Commanders Survey."

3. USAF Management Consultation Information System, Report NR 1: Executive Leadership and Management Summary (Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama: Leadership and Management Development Center, Air University, 15 January 1978), p. 1.

4. Ibid., pp. 29-31.

5. LMDC Management Consultation Information System, Report NR 1: Executive Leadership and Management Summary (Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama: Leadership and Management Development Center, Air University, 30 June 1978), p. 6. Hereafter cited as Report NR 1.

6. Air Force Management Improvement Group, "Quality of Life in the US Air Force," Quality of Air Force Life Survey (Washington: Department of the Air Force, 1975), p. 1.

7. "Base Commanders Survey," Data, responses to questions 117 and 118.

8. Report NR 1, p. 6.

9. Ibid.

10. "Active Duty," Data, response to question 127.

11. Report NR 1, p. 8.

12. Air Force Institute of Technology, "Quality of Air Force Life: A report on the attitudes and perceptions of Air Force commanders" (Technical Report, 11 April 1977), p. 4-6.

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13. <u>Report NR 1</u>, p. 7.

14. "Base Commanders Survey," Data, response to question 118.

15. <u>Report NR 1</u>, p. 12.

16. Paul Hersey; et al, <u>Contracting for Leadership Style</u> (La Jolla, California: Learning Resources Corporation, 1977), pp. 5-12.

17. <u>Report NR 1</u>, p. 9.

18. Ibid.

19. Rensis Likert, <u>New Patterns of Management</u> (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1961), p. 113.

20. Ibid., p. 51.

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